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THE UTILIZATION OF LAND NOT IN FARMS

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Out of several topics relating to land colonization this one has been selected as possibly the most basic. Colonization, if it may be called such, is practiced on public land, and other land not in farms, more often and more easily than on land already in farms, though it may, and does, take place on the latter.

The total amount of land in the United States is a little under 2,000,000,000 acres. Approximately half of this is in farms, leaving a billion acres not in farms. Somewhat less than half of the land not in farms is publicly owned, while over 500,000,000 acres which for some reason or other has made its way into private hands has not yet become part of the farm land of the country. A brief sketch will show how we come to have over 400,000,000 acres of public land left, and where it is. Not so much can be done for the other half billion acres, since the information is not available.

The Remaining Public Lands

To begin with the government has at one time or another held the title of ownership to a billion acres of land, or a little over half of the entire amount. No other country in modern times has had such a quantity of virgin soil, substantially unoccupied, open for settlement, and at the same time easily subdued and habitable, as has the United States during the past century. The absorption of this domain proceeded slowly prior to 1850, due to lack of railroads and farm implements. From 1850 to 1890 the spread of population into the West was tremendous. The increase in the amount of land in farms improved and unimproved was greater than the increase in population for the first ten years of this period, since which time it has steadily declined relatively until in 1910 there was but three-fourths as much land in farms per capita as in 1850. From 1850 to 1880 the increase in population was 117 per cent; the increase in land in farms 83 per cent. From 1880 to 1900 the population increased 50 per cent; the land in farms increased 56 per cent; but by the latter date the situation was reversed and from 1900 to 1910 population increased 20 per cent; land in farms 5 per cent. Thus the land basis of

food production has been constantly narrowed. The farmers of the period from 1870 to 1900 competed so among themselves that prices of produce were held at a ruinously low level. Since that time farm prices have been on the up grade. We have produced seven bushels of wheat per capita instead of nine; about 49 bushels of cereals all counted, in place of the 54 bushels of 1880, a decrease of some 10 per cent. Of course this does not signify that we are getting short of food. It does signify that we are producing, relatively, a smaller surplus. In other words population is growing faster than the food supply. We are not approaching starvation; we are approaching a time when we shall have to pay more attention to our resources instead of using them lavishly.

We have a land problem in the making. Free land, accessible, easy to bring under cultivation, which a man could find and manage almost independently is supposed to have disappeared about 1890. President Francis A. Walker ten years before that time said: "It is, indeed, an astonishing announcement that the public land system, so far as relates to agricultural settlers, has virtually come to an end; that the homestead and preemption acts are practically exhausted of their contents."¹

Since the latter part of the 1890-1900 decade prices have been high—prices of farm produce, and in consequence of farm land. In few places in the world is farm land so high in price as in the corn belt area of the Middle West. Not only is land high in accordance with the value of its product; it is higher in price than the product would seem to warrant. For instance in Iowa a recent study showed that, based on productivity, farm land should sell for \$125 an acre. Actually it was selling in the same locality for \$200. President Walker was mistaken in believing that not much land would be homesteaded after 1880. He was right, even though he set the date a little early, in believing that free land would soon play a different, a minor, rôle in its relation to farm ownership, farm values, and the social problems involved.

We are getting the effect of a larger population on a given area. In Iowa, for example, the value of farm land has outrun the ability of young men to buy it. They were remaining tenants some five years longer in 1910 than in 1890, and there is good evidence to show that this period has been much prolonged during the past seven years. The tenant of 1890 bought a farm at thirty

¹ Tenth Census, Statistics of Agriculture, p. XXXII.

years of age. He now is approaching forty by the time he is able to buy. We have always excused our high percentage of tenancy on the ground that anyhow it was a step toward ownership. Should these steps be lengthened much more there will be a large number unable to take them. We have been proud to think that, aside from the negroes, we had no tenant class. Should the period of tenancy be lengthened another five years we shall certainly have a tenant class. In Iowa the tenants numbered 38 per cent in 1910. The state census of 1915 shows them to have increased to 48 per cent. At this rate Iowa will soon be a state in which tenants are more plentiful than owners.

The problems of land and labor have long been associated. Not agricultural labor, but labor in the larger sense. The organized laborers of the country took a prominent part in the discussion of land questions, especially from 1850 to 1870. The land was a means of escape for all who did not like the conditions imposed by employers. While we have heard from it but infrequently of late the interest of the laborer in the public domain has not yet passed. The Crosser bill introduced in Congress last August was an attempt to make the unused lands of the country the basis of a solution, in part at least, of the question of unemployment.

The continual recurrence of the question of labor in its relation to land calls to mind the words of Jefferson: "Whenever there are in any country uncultivated lands and unemployed labor, it is clear that the laws of property have been so far extended as to violate natural rights." This of course applies to land which has become private property but is not used. Much the same belief induced Lord Macauley a half century later to write regarding America: "The test of your democracy will come after the exhaustion of your free lands."

The disposition already made of the public domain of the United States and the portions remaining may be summed up as follows: Exclusive of Alaska the public domain once equalled about 1,000,000,000 acres of land. We have sold one-fourth of it; granted 170,000,000 acres in homesteads; 160,000,000 acres to railways; 133,000,000 to states for educational purposes; and about 100,000,000 acres in lesser gifts and cessions. Thus we have disposed of three-quarters of the original amount. There is left 280,000,000 acres, besides 160,000,000 acres of forest reserve. In extent the public domain still open to settlement is equal to ten states the size of Pennsylvania, or four the size of Washington.

Again and again during the past thirty-five years men who presumably knew announced that the period of the homestead was about past. Nevertheless the figures from the land office continue to show that the homesteaders are not only still with us, but in constantly increasing numbers. During the first twenty years of the homestead act land was disposed of at the rate of about 2,000,000 acres a year. It went up to three and four millions during the nineties, and since then has, during the past four or five years, ranged from seven to ten million acres a year, while under the grazing homestead act applications were made during the first seven months of 1917 for twenty-four million acres, almost a tenth of the present area open to settlement.

The remarkable rapidity with which land has been taken up under the homestead provision is due in no small part to the recent changes that have been made in the homestead laws. The first homestead act was designed to fit the conditions of the western part of the Middle West. It did fit those conditions admirably. At the same time it was applicable to substantially all government land. Land was homesteaded for the purpose of getting control of the watering places for cattle on the range, and by this means vast areas of grazing land controlled. Homesteads were taken in the heaviest forested regions, and the fields which the homesteaders cleared among the trees were like the bishop's garden, very small measured in the horizontal plane, but "wondrous high." After these abuses had been going on in a flagrant manner for a quarter or third of a century, the demand for a modification to fit conditions became irresistible. However, one must hasten to say that it was not so much the abuse that induced the reform as it was the inability of the homesteader to make a living on a homestead in a region of little rainfall, and devoid of streams, lakes, or forests. In other words it was the exigencies of the homesteader, rather than the interest of the public, that brought about the change. The homesteader on a quarter section of land west of the 100th meridian had hard work to stay out the required length of time. Early attempts to adjust the matter are to be seen in the Timber Culture Act, the Timber and Stone Act, the Desert Entry Act. Recently we have given him more land, and required less of him. There was the Kinkaid Homestead Act applying to land in Nebraska, giving 640 acres. Then came the "enlarged homestead" of 320 acres, first with restricted applications, later made fairly general. Next

came the concession of a three-year residence in place of five, a concession based very directly on the Canadian competition for settlers. Finally we are now giving to homesteaders 640 acres of land and requiring but three years residence and a small expenditure for improvements in lieu of cultivation as required in other cases.

Thus are the laws modified to fit the case with a view to making the remaining government land attractive. Popularly this land is supposed to have little value, but notice the words of the Commissioner of the General Land Office: "Thus we have in what is left of our national domain not a mere remnant to be lightly disposed of as having no longer a federal value, but a vast storehouse of wealth and resources upon which the physical development of the country at large will be ultimately dependent."²

How intelligently are the settlers being chosen and fitted to the land? They are not being chosen at all, or perhaps it might be said that many are called, and all are chosen. It would be impossible to correlate man and land power with any degree of accuracy, since the qualities and powers of the land are not yet at all well known. The government is making a classification which is vastly better than none. Up to the present time, with few exceptions, the settler or purchaser has done the classifying as he chose. Not much information is at hand respecting the percentage of failures of those who take up government land. An estimate was recently made in a section of Montana. Out of 125,000 families going to the state in ten years, 60 per cent brought about \$1900 in money, besides a carload of goods, per family. The other 40 per cent were irresponsible, with little or nothing, and four out of five failed.

On one of the government reclamation projects over half of the settlers abandoned the enterprise after spending much time and money, and this appears to be hardly an exception. From the standpoint of engineering the Reclamation Service has succeeded admirably. From the standpoint of the economic factors involved not so much can be said. We are letting the people experiment with dry land, wet land, and irrigated land, and the percentage of failures is high. Can the state afford to sanction so many of these blind ventures? Or might it not be well for society to undertake the expense, and guide the process of experimentation?

² Report of Commissioner of the General Land Office, 1916, p. 65.

Use of the Public Domain

From the beginning the public domain has been free in several senses, especially for grazing purposes. It has been, and is, too free. Some system has been worked into the use of the national forest reserves, and their range value, under restrictions, has improved. With respect to the use of the grazing lands outside the forest reserves, it has to be admitted that while the government has done much excellent work in the study of forage plants, and the desirability of limiting the use to be made of the range, practically, the stockmen have done as they pleased. This has been disastrous, since no assurance of continued use has been offered, and who would improve land this year with little prospect of retaining any hold on the results for following years? The stockmen have followed the natural, though shortsighted, policy of getting all possible out of the ranges from year to year. The result is a depleted range.

The states, on the contrary, with a price on their lands approaching Wakefield's "sufficient price," themselves deciding when the land shall be sold, have been renting it out at 5 to 35 cents per acre, gaining a revenue, and putting grazing on a securer basis. One state, California, is even undertaking to grapple with the settlement question.

Privately Owned Land Not in Farms

In amount this quantity exceeds the remnant of the public domain. About 550,000,000 acres of land other than farm land are held by individuals or corporations. It is hard to say where it all is. To begin with, roughly 35,000,000 acres are occupied by cities and towns. Over two and a half millions are used in railroad rights of way. Parks and pleasure grounds and cemeteries will account for a very few million acres more. Seventy-five million acres are undrained swamp or overflow lands. Perhaps 150,000,000 to 200,000,000 acres are lumped off under the caption "cut-over lands." These quantities account for but half of the total amount. The balance is mainly forest. In fact the privately owned forests are greater in extent than the amount of land not included in the figures given. This is because of overlappings of farms and forests. The data are not at hand from which to present an exact classification. However, enough has been said to make it plain that no very great tracts of usable agricultural land, such as prairies, semi-arid grazing land, or

other tracts valuable for agriculture, are being held out of use by speculators. Much cut-over land is undoubtedly held at too high a figure, yet the evils of speculation are found less outside of land used for agriculture than in connection with it.

The most important bodies of land not in farms to be brought into agricultural use in the near future are undoubtedly the cut-over districts. In extent they comprise an empire, substantially equivalent in area to two Californias. Many of these acres are as fertile as the average land now tilled. The cut-over area is not literally held out of use by men who intend to keep it a life-time. On the contrary, it is held by men who are willing enough to sell, but incidentally want to make a good sale. They have usually not been much interested in the welfare of the settler, and have sold to anybody who wished to buy. It is not lack of opportunity to buy that stands in the way; neither is it so much the initial price; it is rather the cost of bringing the land from its raw, wild state into subjection. In northern Wisconsin settlers clear land at the rate of two or three acres a year. From the standpoint of agriculture it is hopeless so far as any prompt results are concerned. From the present standpoint of the use of labor it is wasteful. The task is too great for the powers of the man.

Much of this land can be utilized for some years without a radical job of clearing. It can be pastured and in the meantime nature will do the greatest part of the work of stump removal. While individual land agents are working in the interest of society, it is to be doubted that the majority of them are. It is encouraging to see that some important groups of such landholders are setting the pace in far-reaching land development policies. The most conspicuous example of a vision of this kind is that of the Southern Cut-over Land Association. This association is raising money by voluntary taxation with which to develop a workable, permanent colonization plan whereby land may be not merely sold, but developed, and made the basis of community life and civilization.³ Another, and a remarkable instance of close, supervised, settlement by a private company already in operation in the North will be discussed later on the program. At best it must be admitted that the problem of the cut-over land is not yet solved.

³ *The Dawn of a New Constructive Era*. Cut-over Land Conference, New Orleans, 1917.

Land Yet Available for Food Production

The question is often asked as to how much land we have left available for food production. No one is wise enough to answer. Probably a thousand years from now three-fourths of the land area of the United States will be so used. We are not concerned about such a condition. We are concerned about the less remote future. The Department of Agriculture some three years ago made a questionnaire survey of the land of the country to determine approximately the amount of land which might ultimately be tilled. The replies received, from over thirty-five thousand people, indicate that for every acre now in crop there are in the country two and three-fourths tillable acres not in crops. In other words we are tilling but 27 per cent of the tillable land. Various groups of reformers at once seized upon this statement as the basis of discourse. Eloquent stories were written involving a mixture of fact and fiction in about the ratio in which these ingredients are found in Robinson Crusoe, but alas, while Robinson Crusoe is charming in spite of its narrow basis of fact, these harangues and invectives dissolve on being subjected to the acid test. The report given by the Department of Agriculture is the best we have on the one point of arability. It does not purport to reveal any facts as to the obstacles in the way of tillage, or the degree of desirability or futility involved. For instance all pasture land which could conceivably be plowed was included. Here we have 84,000,000 acres, a tract the size of Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois, presumably doing duty as well as practicable under the present conditions. Again we find 55,000,000 acres of this untilled but tillable land in Nevada, a region too alkaline to grow a good crop of sage brush, and in large part too desolate for jack rabbits and coyotes. In other western states is to be found the great body of this land physically capable of cultivation but not yet cultivated. Indeed dry farming is progressing rapidly in these states and the danger is, not that land capable of contributing food for the nation will be left untilled, but that settlers arriving too rapidly will take fairly good grazing land and convert it into sub-marginal farm land to their own undoing. Furthermore, half of the farm land is listed by the Census Bureau as unimproved, and in this category is found a very great deal of land which might be tilled. There are 193,000,000 unimproved acres of farm land not in pasture, but this is frequently put to good use. Some of it is natural meadow; much more is woodland;

relatively little is waste; and the amount of waste is being reduced each year.

A National Land Policy

Not only are we without a land policy of a comprehensive nature, we are not ready to formulate one. We do not know how much land we have available for farming purposes. Or if we know nearly enough how much there is of it, we know next to nothing as to its capabilities. The government is now making a hasty classification of much of its land, but land cannot be classified at a glance. The dean of agriculture in one of the mountain states writes that ten years ago he advised against the homesteading of a certain area of land on the ground that it was more valuable for grazing purposes. It seemed too dry and too wind-swept for crops. Yet since that time it has been homesteaded and the settlers are succeeding.

Land is constantly being classified by settlers, but at great expense. We need first a census that will tell us who owns the land, giving especially the extent and location of individual holdings. Secondly, we need a survey of the land. This should be correlated with such surveys as are under way, particularly the soil survey, adding to the physical facts which are being gathered all the available economic information. Thirdly, we need a policy formulated which shall have for its object the location of suitable settlers on land under favorable circumstances, circumstances likely to lead to success. Fourthly, as a problem sure to become urgent, we need a plan for settling returned soldiers and sailors on land. They will soon be coming back, but not back to their old employments. For many of them the old employments will be gone, or the places filled by other men or by machines. Canada, Australia, and New Zealand have such policies ready for operation. A new adjustment will be imperative. Much of this can be done in connection with vacant lands. Such a policy would necessarily be administered through a commission. It would, if successful, decide scientifically many questions of fundamental consequence which are now being decided with respect to privately owned land by clever land agents, and with respect to the government domain by anyone who takes a notion that it would be a good thing to own a piece of land, and blindly takes up a homestead.

Do We Need More Farm Land Now?

Right now we need to add to the food supply. Shall it be by developing new land? This would hardly seem to be the easiest way except in so far as it can be done with little labor. Grazing may be extended, and on some of our undeveloped lands grazing opportunities are now going to waste. Whenever a given amount of labor and capital will produce more on this wild land, at once, than is being produced by such labor and capital as now employed, or likely to be employed, there is a clear gain in developing the new land. However, the cry for more labor on the farm land now operated is hardly in accord with a demand for the preparation of new fields on which an initial expenditure of labor and capital is demanded before cultivation or other utilization may be begun. Rather we need more fertilizer, more machines, and all the labor available on the farms as they are. But more than at any previous time do we need statesmanship in formulating plans for the future utilization of land, in order that it may, so far as possible, be owned by those who till it; cultivated so as to make it produce without undue depletion of its powers; and be sold when need be on the basis of its productive, rather than its speculative, value.